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## Memorials Are Awful. Long Live Memorials!

All monument designs have their haters. The controversy over the Eisenhower tribute will blow over, eventually.

by [Brian Resnick](#)

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There's a new  
global economy.

To say people don't like [the proposed Eisenhower Memorial](#) is an understatement. Hate might be the better word. During a congressional hearing Monday on the [Frank Gehry](#)-designed memorial, critics didn't keep their feelings to themselves.

"I want to know how we came up with this monstrosity," said Rep. Tim McClintock, R-Calif.

"The Gehry design is, regrettably, unworkable," said Susan Eisenhower, the late president's granddaughter.

"I don't think that the design is an appropriate use of that property, nor an appropriate memorial to President Eisenhower," said Rep. Jim Moran, D-Va.

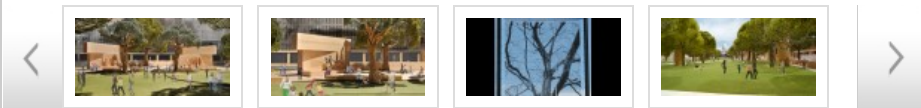
So what is this fuss about?

The memorial, first commissioned in 1999, is an outdoor diorama of the president's life. Two statues of Eisenhower (the president and the war hero) stand amid stones inscribed with his accomplishments. The whole scene is enclosed in giant metal tapestries—imagine yarn made out of steel—rendering the

landscape of Eisenhower's childhood home in Kansas. See for yourself below (these illustrations are from April; the design has been slightly modified since). At least the fake prop people seem happy:



(AP Photo/Eisenhower Memorial Commission)



The Eisenhower family feels it is all a bit much, and thinks the space focuses too much on the president's humble Kansas origins, rather than his accomplishments. Oh, and if you squint, the metal tapestries look kind of like concentration-camp fences. "Nonverbal symbolism, even unintentional, can be as important and powerful as the words of quotation that are etched in stone," Susan Eisenhower, a very vocal critic, [told](#) *National Journal* in June.

None of this controversy is surprising. Neither is the amount of time—14 years—and money—\$37.7 million—already spent on a project that has not yet broken ground. Compared to some other National Mall memorials, the Eisenhower is actually progressing at a quick pace.

All memorials have their haters. For instance, when construction on the Washington Monument was halted in 1877, some thought the stub of marble on the Potomac should be scrapped completely. To critics, the design was too simple, or poorly executed. This was nearly 30 years after the construction began.

"The work and structure of the monument, so far as done, have not been equal to the idea. The Stones are too small, and the foundations insecure," [wrote](#) the art critic James Jackson Jarves. "Better, indeed, that it should crumble into dust in its present incompleteness than to become an everlasting witness to our ignorance and want of taste."

The Lincoln Memorial, which was delayed for decades due to congressional fights, was also thought to be an overwrought waste of money. It was, in fact, a Greek temple built on a swamp.

"So long as I live, I'll never let a memorial to [Abraham Lincoln](#) be

erected in that goddamned swamp,” said Joe Cannon, the House speaker whose vendetta was to stop the construction at all political costs. He even went so far as to try to build the Agriculture Department right in front of the proposed memorial site.

"There is nothing in this Greek temple ... that even suggests to the critical observer either the character, or career, or mission of of Abraham Lincoln," Rep. Isaac Sherwood of Ohio said at the time. "It is time we had some American art and ... American ideas in this national capital."

(Those quotes and the whole tale of the Lincoln Memorial squabble can be found in this [excellent Washington Post feature](#).)

And you'd think people would be OK with the Greco-Roman theme by the time Congress came to commissioning the Jefferson Memorial. Alas, no. Now the problem was that the pantheon design would compete too strongly with the Lincoln Memorial. The ensuing debate was [described in The New York Times](#) as “the fiercest art battle in many years.” (We just don't have art battles like we used to.)

Critics [called the design out](#) on its “squatty dome” and said it looked like a “petrified forest of columns.”

Milton Horn of the American Sculptors Society [said Jefferson would be rolling in his grave](#) at the site of the dome:

“To Jefferson, to whom simplicity and truth were a motive of life, they have now elected to erect an empty shell which possesses not even the kernel of these; a hollow mockery of a spirit which embodies an ideal; a useless structure to symbolize a useful life; a pretentiousness and falsehood to symbolize the search for truth....” You get the point.

Furthermore, fearing destruction of D.C.'s iconic cherry blossoms, 50 women [chained themselves to the cherry trees](#) in protest on the second day of construction. They, in their fur coats, even stole shovels from workers and began refilling holes. Turns out, the construction didn't even destroy the trees; they were transplanted. (Though they were egged on by anti-memorial [comments](#) like, “the Japanese are a sensitive people and might well resent the removal of the trees.”)



Women chain themselves to trees in protest of the Jefferson Memorial. (National Park Service)

And more modern memorials haven't been spared controversy.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial? It was derided as a gloomy, unadorned tombstone.

The World War II Memorial? An overdone monstrosity in a too-central location on the National Mall.

The new Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial? Well, [just about everything](#) about that one was criticized.

I think we're stumbling on a trend here. It would be weird if a

memorial didn't go through this trial by controversy.

Here are some certainties: The Eisenhower Memorial will be built, it will be a pain for all parties involved, some will fight till the bitter end, it will cost a lot, it will take forever—and we'll eventually get used to it.

*(Top photo via Library of Congress)*

*Justin Shubow, President of The National Civic Art Society  
[responded to this story on April 3.](#)*

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